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Stacy L. Smith  
*RONCO Consulting Corporation*

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# RONCO's Response to Explosive Remnants of War in Post-conflict Environments

RONCO's technical experts are dedicated to eliminating threats created by landmines and explosive remnants of war. Part of RONCO's disposal process is creating local demining capacities in their host countries. As part of a quick response, RONCO has most recently added mine-action programs in Iraq and Afghanistan, creating a specialized explosive-ordnance-disposal capacity in Afghanistan and establishing a bomb-disposal training school in Iraq.

by Stacy L. Smith [ RONCO Consulting Corporation ]

Their eyes widen and a smile appears at the first sight of a precariously stacked pile of munitions, newly uncovered bunker of mines or slyly matched pair of explosive devices. They pose for pictures beside rockets in Iraq and caches in Afghanistan. Back at RONCO headquarters in Washington, D.C., it's pretty obvious that these guys—our highly trained technical experts in explosive ordnance disposal—can hardly wait to blow something up.

On second glance, though, something more is apparent: It's not just about loading the pit, unraveling the detonation cord, placing the charges and watching the big explosion. It is about the pride and satisfaction that RONCO's EOD Advisors take in eliminating the threats created by mines and other explosive remnants of war and in transferring their skills to host-nation personnel so future disposal operations can continue unabated once they've departed. Through formal classroom instruction, on-the-job training and mentoring in the disposal of varied and numerous munitions, RONCO has ensured a swift and safe response to the ERW threat, most recently as an added component to its humanitarian mine-action programs in Afghanistan and Iraq.



Abandoned ammunition supply points are prevalent across Afghanistan.

## Background

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, RONCO was on the ground within weeks of the cessation of the initial conflict. In 2001, RONCO sent 14 Technical Advisors to Afghanistan to aid the U.N. Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan in upgrading its clearance efforts, and in 2003, the U.S. Department of State's Quick Reaction Demining Force was deployed to Baghdad to respond to emergency clearance tasks. This led to follow-on requests to develop a national mine-action capacity in Iraq. In both of these situations, RONCO was asked to deploy quickly, foster a national capacity for humanitarian demining and create a capacity for independent EOD operations, with all activities initially funded under the U.S. DOS's Integrated Mine Action Support contract. Historically, RONCO has always disposed of ERW encountered during humanitarian-demining operations. In recent years, however, the importance of developing a local capacity to conduct this work has become more critical as RONCO has increasingly undertaken projects in hostile and fragile post-conflict environments.

RONCO's approach always involves the training of a local national capacity to perform this work, not only because of its extensive

knowledge of the location and type of ordnance found, but because of its desire, like that of RONCO's own field staff, to benefit the communities in which it works. The following accounts of RONCO's approach to building highly specialized disposal teams in Afghanistan and Iraq illustrate the company's success in integrating these capacities into mine-action programs while operating in unstable environments.

## Creating a Specialized EOD Capacity in Afghanistan

In 2001, Coalition bombing throughout Afghanistan left former Taliban and Afghan Army bases destroyed. Left unguarded, these bases and ammunition supply points attracted insurgents gathering munitions for improvised explosive devices and locals collecting scrap metal.

With an increasing number of attacks on Coalition Forces and accidents at the ASPs, their clearance quickly became a priority for local authorities. Following discussions with the U.N. Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan, the U.S. Department of State agreed to form specialized EOD teams operating outside of the normal U.N. structure to address the problem. Under the Department of State's Integrated Mine Action Support contract, RONCO trained five 12-man, specialized EOD teams comprised of local Afghans to operate in Kandahar, Herat, Khost and Mazar-i-Sharif, as well as other sensitive regions of Afghanistan. In addition, RONCO trained four other EOD teams operating under the Demining Agency for Afghanistan, an indigenous nongovernmental organization whose creation in the early 1990s RONCO supported, to focus on clearance of villages in the heavily fought-over southern region of Afghanistan.

RONCO coordinated with local governors and other government officials to identify munitions stockpiles creating threats to the population and also to determine land-use requirements and national priorities. The teams then assessed the type of ordnance, level and type of damage, and security threat posed by the ordnance. RONCO also liaised with Provisional Rehabilitation Teams and Coalition units in the area, who often requested assistance in destroying caches of munitions, deeply buried bombs and other unexploded ordnance, and other weapons hindering their operations.

RONCO's EOD teams first conducted initial surface clearance to recover and destroy ordnance around the perimeter of the bunkers or caches. The teams then breached the damaged bunkers manually or with the aid of mechanical equipment, clearing collapsed walls and debris so the contents of the bunker could be inspected and sorted. Items identified by Coalition Forces as a threat or classified too dangerous to transport were immediately destroyed. After the RONCO EOD teams

emptied each bunker, mechanical equipment was again used to sift through any rubble to locate and remove any remaining UXO.

Due to the security situation in Afghanistan, RONCO trained and employed static guards<sup>1</sup> at its work sites to safeguard personnel and equipment. On duty around the clock, the guards prevented insurgent groups or scrap-metal collectors from stealing munitions. These security elements protected the local population by reducing the threat of improvised explosive devices in their communities and decreasing ordnance-related incidents among scrap collectors, many of whom are children, gathering and selling the metal.

The creation of this specialized EOD capacity in Afghanistan produced impressive results in three years of operations. During the first few weeks of operations in 2003, the teams destroyed over 45,000 107-mm rockets in Kandahar at the request of commanders at Kandahar Air Base, which was under weekly attack. After removing these weapons, the number of attacks on the base was reduced to just six in the entire following year. In total, the EOD teams destroyed over two million items of explosive ordnance, including in part 22,000 mines, 84,000 rockets, 915,000 projectiles, 100 missiles and, of particular interest, 30 man-portable air-defense systems posing a significant threat if obtained by terrorists. This total does not include the disposal of hundreds of tons of small-arms ammunition also found in bunkers or caches.

Additionally, Demining Agency for Afghanistan teams advised and mentored by RONCO cleared Soviet-era munitions from over 400 villages in southern Afghanistan during this time period. These teams, which previously did not know how to dispose of large bombs, were trained by RONCO, developing a national capacity, so land could be rendered safe for local populations.

## Establishing a Bomb-Disposal Training School in Iraq

In March 2005, RONCO was tasked by the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq, through the Department of State's IMAS contract, to provide explosive-ordnance-disposal training and support services to develop up to four Iraqi National Guard EOD companies. For this project, RONCO tapped its instructional cadre from the Iraqi Mine/UXO Clearance Organization, which was created and trained by RONCO between 2003 and 2004.

After the initial mobilization of RONCO and IMCO personnel, along with the renovation of living and classroom facilities at a compound in southern Iraq, planning and coordination for the first course commenced. The RONCO/IMCO staff developed and implemented training programs, programs of instruction,



Afghanistan's landscape is littered with stacks of abandoned and unsecured ordnance.



lesson plans, multimedia presentations, and training aids to provide practical and technical training to up to 200 students at any one time in leadership, basic trauma life support, and EOD Levels I, II and III training.<sup>2</sup> As was the case in Afghanistan, RONCO trained and employed a security force at its training facility in Iraq to protect personnel and equipment.

In 2005, the program graduated over 350 students, including 55 Iraqi officers and staff noncommissioned officers in leadership positions and 301 Iraqi soldiers trained in bomb disposal with basic trauma life support. Of the 301 Iraqi soldiers trained, 242 were trained to EOD Level III and 59 were trained to EOD Levels I and II. RONCO also developed a database of the students' qualifications for use in maintaining records of student development and to assist in identifying students for subsequent, more advanced training requirements.

RONCO augmented its existing training facilities and staff in December 2005 following winning a new contract to provide EOD, improvised-explosive-device disposal and instructor training to the Iraqi Army and Police to further respond to threats posed by bombs and IEDs throughout Iraq.

With technical advice from RONCO personnel, the IMCO instructor cadre continues to conduct these training courses. In 2006, RONCO expects to train approximately 185 IED Disposal Specialists to locate, identify, dispose of and report on UXO and IEDs, vehicle-borne IEDs and

other explosive threats persisting in Iraq; another 650 EOD Level II Operators and 30 advanced medical personnel will also be trained. Additionally, RONCO will train and mentor a 40-person Iraqi instructor cadre in EOD and IEDD to establish a viable host-nation training capability.

### The Expanding Role of Mine Action

RONCO's guys are never hesitant or ill-equipped for a mission, whether it's a task to destroy mines, empty a bunker filled to the brim with rockets or respond to an IED threat. In their careers, they have defused, disarmed and destroyed it all and effectively transferred these skills to host-nation personnel. Oftentimes, RONCO Advisors work alongside these people to mentor them every step of the way, assisting in stacking ordnance for on-site detonation or hoisting munitions onto a truck for transport to a central disposal site.

As evidenced in the company's recent post-conflict experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, RONCO has created specialized EOD capacities to address specifically the ERW threat as an extension of mine action. The extremely dangerous nature of working in these fragile environments has required the deployment and use of security in mine action, an added component to safeguard RONCO's people while fulfilling its commitment to the host nation and a testament to its commitment to this expanding mine-action role. ♦

*See Endnotes, page 112*



Stacy L. Smith is the Communications and Proposal Manager for RONCO Consulting Corporation, where she has worked for the past four years. She held the Frasure-Kreuzel-Drew Fellowship in the U.S. Department of State's Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs from 2001 to 2002, following graduation with a bachelor's degree in media arts and design from James Madison University. During her studies at JMU, she worked as an Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Mine Action*.

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Stacy L. Smith  
Communications and Proposal  
Manager  
RONCO Consulting Corporation  
2301 M Street, NW Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20037 / USA  
Tel: +1 202 785 2791  
E-mail: [ssmith@roncowash.com](mailto:ssmith@roncowash.com)  
Web site:  
[www.roncoconsulting.com](http://www.roncoconsulting.com)